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THE GROWTH OF INDIAN MYTHOLOGIES.

A STUDY BASED UPON THE GROWTH OF THE MYTHOLOGIES OF THE
NORTH PACIFIC COAST.¹

IN a collection of Indian traditions recently published (*"Indi-
nische Sagen von der Nord-Pacifischen Küste Nordamerikas,"*
Berlin, A. Asher & Co.), I have discussed the development of the
mythologies of the Indians of the North Pacific coast. I will, in
the following paper, briefly sum up the results at which I arrived in
my investigation, and try to formulate a number of principles which,
it seems to me, may be derived from it, and which, I believe, ought
to be observed in all work on mythologies and customs of primi-
tive people.

The region with which I deal, the North Pacific coast of our conti-
nent, is inhabited by people diverse in language but alike in culture.

The arts of the tribes of a large portion of the territory are so
uniform that it is almost impossible to discover the origin of even
the most specialized forms of their productions inside of a wide
expanse of territory. Acculturation of the various tribes has had
the effect that the plane and the character of the culture of most of
them is the same; in consequence of this we find also that myths
have travelled from tribe to tribe, and that a large body of legends
belongs to many in common.

As we depart from the area where the peculiar culture of the North
Pacific coast has reached its highest development, a gradual change
in arts and customs takes place, and, together with it, we find a
gradual diminution in the number of myths which the distant tribe
has in common with the people of the North Pacific coast. At the
same time, a gradual change in the incidents and general character
of the legends takes place.

¹ Paper read at the Seventh Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Soci-
ety, Philadelphia, December 27, 1895.

We can in this manner trace what we might call a dwindling down of an elaborate cyclus of myths to mere adventures, or even to incidents of adventures, and we can follow the process step by step. Wherever this distribution can be traced, we have a clear and undoubted example of the gradual dissemination of a myth over neighboring tribes. The phenomena of distribution can be explained only by the theory that the tales have been carried from one tribe to its neighbors, and by the tribe which has newly acquired them in turn to its own neighbors. It is not necessary that this dissemination should always follow one direction; it may have proceeded either way. In this manner a complex tale may dwindle down by gradual dissemination, but also new elements may be embodied in it.

It may be well to give an example of this phenomenon. The most popular tradition of the North Pacific coast is that of the raven. Its most characteristic form is found among the Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida. As we go southward, the connection between the adventurers becomes looser and their number less. It appears that the traditions are preserved quite fully as far south as the north end of Vancouver Island. Farther south the number of tales which are known to the Indians diminishes very much. At Newetsee, near the north point of Vancouver Island, thirteen tales out of a whole of eighteen exist. The Comox have only eight, the Nootka six, and the Coast Salish only three. Furthermore, the traditions are found at Newetsee in the same connection as farther north, while farther south they are very much modified. The tale of the origin of daylight, which was liberated by the raven, may serve as an instance. He had taken the shape of the spike of a cedar, was swallowed by the daughter of the owner of the daylight, and then born again; afterwards he broke the box in which the daylight was kept. Among the Nootka, only the transformation into the spike of a cedar, which is swallowed by a girl and then born again, remains. Among the Coast Salish the more important passages survive, telling how the raven by a ruse compelled the owner of the daylight to let it out of the box in which he kept it. The same story is found as far south as Grey's Harbor in Washington. The adventure of the pitch, which the raven kills by exposing it to the sunshine, intending to use it for caulking his canoe, is found far south, but in an entirely new connection, embodied in the tradition of the origin of sun and moon.

But there are also certain adventures embodied in the raven myths of the north which probably had their origin in other parts of America. Among these I mention the tale how the raven was invited and reciprocated. The seal puts his hands near the fire, and grease drips out of them into a dish which he gives to the raven. Then

the latter tries to imitate him, but burns his hands, etc. This tale is found, in one or the other form, all over North America, and there is no proof that it originally belonged to the raven myth of Alaska. For other examples I refer to my book.

I believe the proposition that dissemination has taken place among neighboring tribes will not encounter any opposition. Starting from this point, we will make the following considerations : —

If we have a full collection of the tales and myths of all the tribes of a certain region, and then tabulate the number of incidents which all the collections from each tribe have in common with any selected tribe, the number of common incidents will be the larger the more intimate the relation of the two tribes and the nearer they live together. This is what we observe in a tabulation of the material collected on the North Pacific coast. On the whole, the nearer the people, the greater the number of common elements; the farther apart, the less the number.

But it is not the geographical location alone which influences the distribution of tales. In some cases, numerous tales which are common to a certain territory stop short at a certain point, and are found beyond it in slight fragments only. These limits do not by any means coincide with the linguistic divisions. An example of this kind is the raven legend, to which I referred before. It is found in substantially the same form from Alaska to northern Vancouver Island; then it suddenly disappears almost entirely, and is not found among the southern tribes of Kwakiutl lineage, nor on the west coast of Vancouver Island, although the northern tribes, who speak the Kwakiutl language, have it. Only fragments of these legends have strayed farther south, and their number diminishes with increasing distance. There must be a cause for such a remarkable break. A statistical inquiry shows that the northern traditions are in close contact with the tales of the tribes as far south as the central part of Vancouver Island, where a tribe of Salish lineage is found; but farther they do not go. The closely allied tribes immediately south do not possess them. Only one explanation of this fact is possible, viz., lack of acculturation, which may be due either to a difference of character, to continued hostilities, or to recent changes in the location of the tribes, which has not allowed the slow process of acculturation to exert its deep-going influence. I consider the last the most probable cause. My reason for holding this opinion is that the Bilxula, another Salish tribe, who have become separated from the people speaking related languages and live in the far north, still show in their mythologies the closest relations to the southern Salish tribes, with whom they have many more traits in common than their neighbors to the north and to the south. If their removal were

a very old one, this similarity in mythologies would probably not have persisted, but they would have been quite amalgamated by their new neighbors.

We may also extend our comparisons beyond the immediate neighbors of the tribes under consideration by comparing the mythologies of the tribes of the plateaus in the interior, and even of those farther to the east with those of the coast. Unfortunately, the available material from these regions is very scanty. Fairly good collections exist from the Athapascan, from the tribes of Columbia River and east of the mountains, from the Omaha, and from some Algonquin tribes. When comparing the mythologies and traditions which belong to far-distant regions, we find that the number of incidents which they have in common is greater than might have been expected; but some of those incidents are so general that we may assume that they have no connection, and may have arisen independently. There is, however, one very characteristic feature which proves beyond cavil that this is not the sole cause of the similarity of tales and incidents. We know that in the region under discussion two important trade routes reached the Pacific coast, one along the Columbia River, which connected the region inhabited by Shoshonean tribes with the coast and indirectly led to territories occupied by Siouan and Algonquin tribes; another one which led from Athapascan territory to the country of the Bilxula. A trail of minor importance led down Fraser River. A study of the traditions shows that along these routes the points of contact of mythologies are strongest, and rapidly diminish with increasing distances from these routes. On Columbia River, the points of contact are with the Algonquin and Sioux; among the Bilxula they are with the Athapascan. I believe this phenomenon cannot be explained in any other way but that the myths followed the line of travel of the tribes, and that there has been dissemination of tales all over the continent. My tabulations include the Micmac of Nova Scotia, the Eskimo of Greenland, the Ponca of the Mississippi Basin, and the Athapascan of the Mackenzie River, and the results give the clearest evidence of extensive borrowing.

The identity of a great many tales in geographically contiguous areas have led me to the point of view of assuming that wherever a greater similarity between two tales is found in North America, it is more likely to be due to dissemination than to independent origin.

But without extending these theories beyond the clearly demonstrated truths of transmission of tales between neighboring tribes, we may reach some further conclusions. When we compare, for instance, the legend of the culture hero of the Chinook and that of the origin of the whole religious ceremonial of the Kwakiutl Indi-

ans, we find a very far-reaching resemblance in certain parts of the legends which make it certain that these parts are derived from the same source. The grandmother of the divinity of the Chinook, when a child, was carried away by a monster. Their child became the mother of the culture hero, and by her help the monster was slain. In a legend from Vancouver Island, a monster, the cannibal spirit, carries away a girl, and is finally slain by her help. Their child becomes later on the new cannibal spirit. There are certain intermediate stages of these stories which prove their identity beyond doubt. The important point in this case is that the myths in question are perhaps the most fundamental ones in the mythologies of these two tribes. Nevertheless, they are not of native growth, but, partly at least, borrowed. A great many other important legends prove to be of foreign origin, being grafted upon mythologies of various tribes. This being the case, I draw the conclusion that the mythologies of the various tribes as we find them now are not organic growths, but have gradually developed and obtained their present form by accretion of foreign material. Much of this material must have been adopted ready-made, and has been adapted and changed in form according to the genius of the people who borrowed it. The proofs of this process are so ample that there is no reason to doubt the fact. We are, therefore, led to the conclusion that from mythologies in their present form it is impossible to derive the conclusion that they are mythological explanations of phenomena of nature observed by the people to whom the myths belong, but that many of them, at the place where we find them now, never had such a meaning. If we acknowledge this conclusion as correct, we must give up the attempts at off-hand explanation of myths as fanciful, and we must admit that, also, explanations given by the Indians themselves are often secondary, and do not reflect the true origin of the myths.

I do not wish to be misunderstood in what I said. Certainly, the phenomena of nature are at the bottom of numerous myths, else we should not find sun, moon, clouds, thunder-storm, the sea and the land play so important a part in all mythologies. What I maintain is only that the specific myth cannot be simply interpreted as the result of observation of natural phenomena. Its growth is much too complex. In most cases, the present form has undergone material change by disintegration and by accretion of foreign material, so that the original underlying idea is, at best, much obscured.

Perhaps the objection might be raised to my argument that the similarities of mythologies are not only due to borrowing, but also to the fact that, under similar conditions which prevail in a limited area, the human mind creates similar products. While there is a

certain truth in this argument so far as elementary forms of human thought are concerned, it seems quite incredible that the same complex theory should originate twice in a limited territory. The very complexity of the tales and their gradual dwindling down to which I have referred before, cannot possibly be explained by any other method than by dissemination. Wherever geographical continuity of the area of distribution of a complex ethnographical phenomenon is found, the laws of probability exclude the theory that in this continuous area the complex phenomenon has arisen independently in various places, but compel us to assume that in its present complex form its distribution is due to dissemination, while its composing elements may have originated here and there.

It may be well to dwell on the difference between that comparative method which I have pursued in my inquiry and that applied by many investigators of ethnographical phenomena. I have strictly confined my comparisons to contiguous areas in which we know intercourse to have taken place. I have shown that this area extends from the Pacific coast to considerable distances. It is true that the mythologies of the far east and the extreme northeast are not as well connected with those of the Pacific coast by intermediate links as they might be, and I consider it essential that a fuller amount of material from intermediate points be collected in order that the investigation which I have begun may be carried out in detail. But a comparison of the fragmentary notes which we possess from intermediate points proves that most of those tales which I have enumerated as common to the east, to the north, and to the west, will be found covering the whole area continuously. Starting from this fact, we may be allowed to argue that those complex tales which are now found only in isolated portions of our continent either are actually continuous but have not been recorded from intermediate points; or that they have become extinct in intermediate territory; or, finally, that they were carried over certain areas accidentally, without touching the intermediate field. This last phenomenon may happen, although probably not to a very great extent. I observed one example of this kind on the Pacific coast, where a tale which has its home in Alaska is found only in one small group of tribes on southern Vancouver Island, where, as can be proved, it has been carried either by visitors or by slaves.

The fundamental condition, that all comparisons must be based on material collected in contiguous areas, differentiates our method from that of investigators like Petitot and many others, who see a proof of dissemination or even of blood relationship in each similarity that is found between a certain tribe and any other tribe of the globe. It is clear that the greater the number of tribes which are brought

forward for the purposes of such comparisons, the greater also the chance of finding similarities. It is impossible to derive from such comparisons sound conclusions, however extensive the knowledge of literature that the investigator may possess, for the very reason that the complex phenomenon found in one particular region is compared to fragmentary evidence from all over the world. By means of such comparisons, we can expect to find resemblances which are founded in the laws of the development of the human mind, but they can never be proofs of transmission of customs or ideas.

In the Old World, wherever investigations on mythologies of neighboring tribes have been made, the philological proof has been considered the weightiest, *i. e.*, when, together with the stories, the names of the actors have been borrowed, this has been considered the most satisfactory proof of borrowing. We cannot expect to find such borrowing of names to prevail to a great extent in America. Even in Asia, the borrowed names are often translated from one language into the other, so that their phonetic resemblance is entirely destroyed. The same phenomenon is observed in America. In many cases, the heroes of myths are animals, whose names are introduced in the myth. In other cases, names are translated, or so much changed according to the phonetic laws of various languages, that they can hardly be recognized. Cases of transmission of names are, however, by no means rare. I will give only a few examples from the North Pacific coast.

Almost all the names of the Bilxula mythology are borrowed from the Kwakiutl language. A portion of the great religious ceremony of the Kwakiutl has the name "tlokwa." This name, which is also closely connected with a certain series of myths, has spread northward and southward over a considerable distance. Southward we find it as far as the Columbia River, while to the north it ceases with the Tsimshian; but still farther north another name of a part of the ceremonial of the Kwakiutl is substituted, *viz.*, "nontlem." This name, as designating the ceremonial, is found far into Alaska. But these are exceptions; on the whole, the custom of translating names and of introducing names of animals excludes the application of the linguistic method of investigating the borrowing of myths and customs.

We will consider for a moment the method by which traditions spread over contiguous areas, and I believe this consideration will show clearly that the standpoint which I am taking, *viz.*, that similarity of traditions in a continuous area is always due to dissemination, not to independent origin, is correctly taken. I will exemplify this also by means of the traditions of the North Pacific coast, more particularly by those of the Kwakiutl Indians.

It seems that the Kwakiutl at one time consisted of a number of village communities. Numbers of these village communities combined and formed tribes; then each village community formed a clan of the new tribe. Owing probably to the influence of the clan system of the northern tribes, totems were adopted, and with these totems came the necessity of acquiring a clan legend. The social customs of the tribe are based entirely upon the division into clans, and the ranking of each individual is the higher — at least to a certain extent — the more important the legend of his clan. This led to a tendency of building up clan legends. Investigation shows that there are two classes of clan legends: the first telling how the ancestor of the clan came down from heaven, out of the earth, or out of the ocean; the second telling how he encountered certain spirits and by their help became powerful. The latter class particularly bear the clearest evidence of being of a recent origin; they are based entirely on the custom of the Indians of acquiring a guardian spirit after long-continued fasting and bathing. The guardian spirit thus acquired by the ancestor became hereditary, and is to a certain extent the totem of the clan, — and there is no doubt that these traditions, which rank now with the fundamental myths of the tribe, are based on the actual fastings and acquisitions of guardian spirits of ancestors of the present clans. If that is so, we must conclude that the origin of the myth is identical with the origin of the hallucination of the fasting Indian, and this is due to suggestion, the material for which is furnished by the tales of other Indians, and traditions referring to the spiritual world which the fasting Indian may have heard. There is, therefore, in this case a very strong psychological reason for involuntary borrowing from legends which the individual may have heard, no matter from what source they may have been derived. The incorporation in the mythology of the tribe is due to the peculiar social organization which favors the introduction of any myth of this character if it promises to enhance the social position of the clan.

The same kind of suggestion which I mentioned here has evidently moulded the beliefs in a future life. All myths describing the future life set forth how a certain individual died, how his soul went to the world of the ghosts, but returned for one reason or the other. The experiences which the man told after his recovery are the basis of the belief in a future life. Evidently, the visions of the sick person are caused entirely by the tales which he had heard of the world of the ghosts, and the general similarity of the character of this tale along the Pacific coast proves that one vision was always suggested by the other.

Furthermore, the customs of the tribe are such that by means of

a marriage the young husband acquires the clan legends of his wife, and the warrior who slays an enemy those of the person whom he has slain. By this means a large number of traditions of the neighboring tribes have been incorporated in the mythology of the Kwakiutl.

The psychological reason for the borrowing of myths which do not refer to clan legends, but to the heavenly orbs and to the phenomena of nature, are not so easily found. There can be no doubt that the impression made by the grandeur of nature upon the mind of primitive man is the ultimate cause from which these myths spring, but, nevertheless, the form in which we find these traditions is largely influenced by borrowing. It is also due to its effects that in many cases the ideas regarding the heavenly orbs are entirely inconsistent. Thus the Newetsee have the whole northern legend of the raven liberating the sun, but, at the same time, the sun is considered the father of the *mink*, and we find a tradition of the visit of the *mink* in heaven, where he carries the sun in his father's place. Other inconsistencies, as great as this one, are frequent. They are an additional proof that one or the other of such tales which are also found among neighboring tribes, — and there sometimes in a more consistent form, — have been borrowed.

These considerations lead me to the following conclusion, upon which I desire to lay stress. The analysis of one definite mythology of North America shows that in it are embodied elements from all over the continent, the greater number belonging to neighboring districts, while many others belong to distant areas, or, in other words, that dissemination of tales has taken place all over the continent. In most cases, we can discover the channels through which the tale flowed, and we recognize that in each and every mythology of North America we must expect to find numerous foreign elements. And this leads us to the conclusion that similarities of culture on our continent are always more likely to be due to diffusion than to independent development. When we turn to the Old World, we know that there also diffusion has taken place through the whole area from western Europe to the islands of Japan, and from Indonesia to Siberia, and to northern and eastern Africa. In the light of the similarities of inventions and of myths, we must even extend this area along the North Pacific coast of America as far south as Columbia River. These are facts that cannot be disputed.

If it is true that dissemination of cultural elements has taken place in these vast areas, we must pause before accepting the sweeping assertion that sameness of ethnical phenomena is *always* due to the sameness of the working of the human mind, and I take clearly and expressly issue with the view of those modern anthropologists

who go so far as to say that he who looks for acculturation as a cause of similarity of culture has not grasped the true spirit of anthropology.

In making this statement, I wish to make my position perfectly clear. I am, of course, well aware that there are many phenomena of social life seemingly based on the most peculiar and most intricate reasoning, which we have good cause to believe have developed independently over and over again. There are others, particularly such as are more closely connected with the emotional life of man, which are undoubtedly due to the organization of the human mind. Their domain is large and of high importance. Furthermore, the similarity of culture which may or may not be due to acculturation gives rise to the same sort of ideas and sentiments which will originate independently in different minds, modified to a greater or less extent by the character of environment. Proof of this are the ideas and inventions which even in our highly specialized civilization are "in the air" at certain periods, and are pronounced independently by more than one individual, until they combine in a flow which carries on the thought of man in a certain direction. All this I know and grant.

But I do take the position that this enticing idea is apt to carry us too far. Formerly, anthropologists saw acculturation or even common descent wherever two similar phenomena were observed. The discovery that this conclusion is erroneous, that many similarities are due to the psychical laws underlying human development, has carried us beyond its legitimate aim, and we start now with the presumption that all similarities are due to these causes, and that their investigation is the legitimate field of anthropological research. I believe this position is just as erroneous as the former one. We must not accuse the investigator who suspects a connection between American and Asiatic cultures as deficient in his understanding of the true principles of anthropology. Nobody has proven that the psychical view holds good in all cases. To the contrary, we know many cases of diffusion of customs over enormous areas. The reaction against the uncritical use of similarities for the purpose of proving relationship and historical connections is overreaching its aim. Instead of demanding a critical examination of the causes of similarities, we say now *a priori*, they are due to psychical causes, and in this we err in method just as much as the old school did. If we want to make progress on the desired line, we must insist upon critical methods, based not on generalities but on each individual case. In many cases, the final decision will be in favor of independent origin; in others in favor of dissemination. But I insist that nobody has as yet proven where the limit between these two modes of origin

lies, and not until this is done can a fruitful psychological analysis take place. We do not even know if the critical examination may not lead us to assume a persistence of cultural elements which were diffused at the time when man first spread over the globe.

It will be necessary to define clearly what Bastian terms the elementary ideas, the existence of which we know to be universal, and the origin of which is not accessible to ethnological methods. The forms which these ideas take among primitive people of different parts of the world, "die Völker-Gedanken," are due partly to the geographical environment and partly to the peculiar character of the people, and to a large extent to their history. In order to understand the growth of the peculiar psychical life of the people, the historical growth of its customs must be investigated most closely, and the only method by which the history can be investigated is by means of a detailed comparison of the tribe with its neighbors. This is the method which I insist is necessary in order to make progress towards the better understanding of the development of mankind. This investigation will also lead us to inquire into the interesting psychological problems of acculturation, viz., what conditions govern the selection of foreign material embodied in the culture of the people, and the mutual transformation of the old culture and the newly acquired material.

To sum up, I maintain that the whole question is decided only in so far as we know that independent development as well as diffusion have made each culture what it is. It is still *sub judice* in how far these two causes contributed to its growth. The aspects from which we may look at the problem have been admirably set forth by Professor Otis T. Mason in his address on similarities of culture.¹ In order to investigate the psychical laws of the human mind which we are seeing now indistinctly because our material is crude and unsifted, we must treat the culture of primitive people by strict historical methods. We must understand the process by which the individual culture grew before we can undertake to lay down the laws by which the culture of all mankind grew.

The end for which we are working is farther away than the methods which are now in greatest favor seem to indicate, but it is worth our struggles.

Franz Boas.

¹ *American Anthropologist*, 1895, p. 101.